



The Gymnopédies Never End

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The Gymnopédies Never End

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The Suicide Circus

Cirque;

Circus

Lent Et Douloureux

Slow and Painfully

Lent Et Triste

Slow and Sadly

Lent Et Grave

Slow and Gravely

Slow and Painfully, or Flabby Preludes (for a dog)¹

Come to think of it, I don't remember ever playing at an amusement park when I was younger, thought Usami Renko², as she looked up at the rotating Ferris wheel. The leather bag she brought with her was miserably heavy.

What did anyone ever come here to find? Amusement? But that is only a façade. For what? Probably something I haven't lived long enough to measure.

The wind left in the wake of summer's death was too warm for Renko's light jacket, and the nape of her neck was uncomfortably hot—but it would be too cold to take it off, now that she was sweating.

"I knew I shouldn't have brought my jacket," grumbled Renko, half-audibly, as she felt droplets of sweat re-condense out of the steamy atmosphere under her clothes.

At just over an hour (with transfers) the trip from the new capital to the amusement park was too short to take a proper nap, but long enough that the distance set the park outside the sphere of destinations a reasonable person might endeavor towards after watching the shadows of evening stretch across the earth. *But here we are.*

The cage of sporadic planted trees surrounding the amuse-

¹Lent et Dououreux, or Préludes Flasques (pour un chien). The former is the playing instructions for Erik Satie's Gymnopédie No. 1, and the latter is the title of one of his "humoristic" piano suites.

²Where "Usami" is Renko's surname. (Japanese Name Order)

ment park—a rare sight nowadays, but still a pitiful show of effort—only served to strengthen the impression that the place was abandoned.

Renko had never been to this particular amusement park; if memory served her, this was the first time in her life she had ever been to an amusement park at all. *I'm not even sure I've ever heard anyone I've known or seen utter one's name before*, she thought. *They certainly used to exist—amusement parks—in old stories and the like, and I'm sure I've seen pictures of them before, decayed as they were with age...* But Renko had to admit, standing in one felt like encountering a cryptid: supposedly they exist, somewhere in the world, but the only reliable place to find one is in an encyclopedia.

When did amusement parks, these empty collections of machinery, fall from the hands of children?

There is no such thing as a gap-less human being. There are breaks in the continuity of our time, and of our hearts and minds. Two may hold hands, but the fusion of their being ends at the shoulders—two do not become one. No one can survive without others; everyone exists solely in their own insurmountable isolation. You cannot see another's dreams. You do not see the world they live in. Therein lie the gaps, and the longing that demands we fill them with *something*. But that something inevitably takes the form of a shared minimal threshold, the lowest common denominator of happiness. It may be a fairytale, or an inoffensive musical scale, or an aimlessly spinning carousel. In other

words, we seek amusement, and amusement exists for us to cram into our empty spaces. However, fulfillment decays into boredom, and we never stop searching for something to shove into the gaps in our being. It has to be new; it has to have a different color to it—but under its dressings it's all the same in its aim and its substance: something inoffensively pleasant. And as we turn our gazes to the next big thing, the playthings we have discarded rot in silent wreckage, forgotten.

But that giant Ferris wheel, a discarded relic that long should have collapsed into a mound of rubble, defied Renko's expectations. Even as it turned, swaying in the wind under the full moon, not a creak could be heard.

"Well that is something you don't see every day," remarked Maribel Hearn³ in a flat, unimpressed tone. Merry was a friend Renko had dragged along with her to the spot.

Renko did not respond, but looked up again at the structure, holding her hat so it would not blow away.

The giant, forgotten machine marched aimlessly along in its trademark circular motion, every inch of it covered with light emitting diodes, so that the illumination it cast pulled the outlines of the other park's artifacts out of the blackness of the night. The juxtaposition it cast of various shades of sky and caked paint only enhanced the feeling Renko had that she was staring at a fossilized specimen in a museum. It offered only desolation to fill her empty spaces.

³Where "Hearn" is Merry's surname. (Western Name Order)

Merry and Renko appeared to be alone. There was no sign of *any* staff, let alone the fabled costumed characters supposedly populating amusement parks, nor was there sign of any other visitors to intercept the lights projected upon the screen of night. There were only machines, still turning—turning by design—despite being unasked for and unwanted. The autumn wind again brushed the nape of Renko’s neck as it passed her by, on its way to an unknown destination.

“What should we ride?” asked Merry.

Merry did not wait for Renko to answer, but immediately started walking, each step unplanned, as if she found herself lost in a curious dream, ready to wander.

Renko followed, dragging her heavy bag behind her. There was a story Renko remembered, made up long ago, about a man with a bag walking endlessly about a city. One day, someone stopped to ask him: Where do you want to go? The man answered: I have no way of knowing. The bag decides for me. This someone asked again: Then, what is your bag? The man’s answer was to hand over his bag. *You tell me*, he said, and in that moment, the one who held the bag became the new man with the bag, and the man before—no longer. The bag swayed, pulling him in the direction of its weight. The man had no choice but to follow. He could not open the bag, and whenever he stopped, the bag would decide in which new direction it wished to continue, greedily pulling the man along. As Renko felt the weight of her bag, she remembered hearing

the story somewhere, but where did she hear it?

There really is no one around, is there? thought Renko, as she looked at the carousel, the roller coaster, the spinning tea cup ride and freak show of fake horrors. All asserted their existence loudly with bright colored lights, but there were no visitors to witness them.

That's right, Renko thought. She was beginning to question why she had ever thought to come to such a place, but remembered she had heard rumors—rumors there was an amusement park on the verge of collapse nearby—and was drawn to the idea she might find something in this place all but forgotten by the world—but what? The answer eluded her, but in the end, she decided it did not matter. *I must have just thought Merry might see something here.*

Renko looked up at the sky. The faint light of the stars was drowned out by the light of the diodes, and it was impossible to pick out any details. Only the moon was clear to see, a blue-white half-moon. 7:48:12 PM read the present time etched in the back of her mind.

Renko reached into her coat pocket and drew out an elongated box-shaped object made of plastic, which fit easily into the palm of her hand. She turned it over so that its narrowest end faced upwards, brought it to her mouth, and bit down on a spring-loaded latch near the bottom. This opened up two side-by-side compartments: one held a silver tube, and the other was empty. Renko set her bag down to free another hand and reached into her shirt pocket to retrieve what looked like an enlarged fuse. She examined

it: the brown, sticky substance inside slid slowly down the clear glass walls of the container, dragged by its own weight. Renko inserted this fuse-like container into the empty compartment, shut the latch and turned the box-like object back over. With the cartridge loaded into its proper compartment, Renko slid her thumb along the side of the plastic box, causing a thin resin pipe to extend from top. Renko then wrapped her pointer finger on a small trigger on the opposite side of the box, and she pulled it with a click after inserting the end of the pipe in her mouth. On the broadest side of the box, a green light flicked on. Renko picked her bag back off the ground with her free hand and inhaled. A thin stream of bluish white smoke rose up through the pipe and into her mouth where it idled.

“Well isn’t that a neat little thing you have there?”

The voice caught Renko by surprise. She turned her head towards the voice and saw a girl sitting on an iron bench painted bronze with arabesque designs. *A girl...?* The word stuck as it formed in Renko’s thoughts. Was that the right word to use? She wondered. The girl, for lack of a better term, wore cords dyed red with sappanwood dye, tied up in her hair at each ear. Her blonde hair was short and the color of ripe rice ears, and it swayed as they did in the wind. She wore a white, frilled blouse with a thin black ribbon hanging from her neck and a long black skirt with layers alternating between black and red—clothes only a doll would wear—but her attire is not what gave Renko pause. The girl’s eyes made Renko hesitant to define what she was looking at. Their depth made Renko feel as if she

were staring down into the dark bottom of a well. That, and the fact that the girl sat in a slovenly pose with a *kiseru*⁴ in her hand, destroyed whatever child-like impression she might have otherwise had.

Renko was aware of a growing trend among people to seek out a sense of nostalgia in inefficient things, so it wasn't much of a surprise to her to see something crafted in the image of a old fashioned pipe—Renko had seen several such objects used by students at her university—but *those were not real*. Every such pipe Renko had seen before was nothing more than an over-decorated vaporizer. The process of igniting natural gas or animal-derived oils to oxidize tobacco leaves and inhale their smoke was extinct as far as pastimes go, unless you were a wealthy eccentric with plenty of money to throw around. *Even then*, Renko thought, *all those people smoke are cigars*. Nevertheless, whatever it was that girl-like thing was holding, smoke was clearly rising from its end, drawing a turbulent locus as it interacted with the night air and was swept by the wind into the depths of the amusement park. Vaporizers, whether they be simple like Renko's or shaped like other bygone devices, shared one thing in common: the vapors they produced were ejected solely at their mouthpieces. The reason was simple. It was to prevent second-hand smoke, a main factor in the decline of cigarettes long ago. It was unacceptable nowadays, for a device to be releasing so much

⁴A long tobacco pipe with a metal mouthpiece and bowl, the design and length of which denoted status among high-ranking prostitutes in the Edo period.

smoke into the surrounding air.

“I won’t argue; yours is the more efficient way, by far—a method followed to its logical conclusion—but where is the taste in that? What is the point if you cannot drink in the feeling of a moment bound to end when its fire is extinguished!?” the girl exclaimed with a sweet but throaty cackle, and tapped the end of her pipe on the bench with a clang. The ashes in the pipe’s bowl fell out in one clump, broken and swept away by the wind before it could reach the concrete ground.

The girl reached for a wool drawstring purse that lay tossed to the side and removed a small wooden box. She opened it by pressing her hand against the top face and sliding it aside to reveal shredded tobacco leaves. She then took a pinch of said leaves, rolled the pinch into a ball in her fingers and pressed the ball into the bowl of her pipe. As she brought the pipe back to her mouth, she reached into the same purse and removed a paper box. With one hand, she deftly opened the box, pulled out a long wooden stick from within, and struck it against the box’s side.

Pfff... An orange light burst forth from the tip, the only natural light in a sea of fakes.

A match... Renko thought. She had never seen one before. It exuded more fantasy than entirety of the park around them.

After the girl used the match to light the tobacco at the end of her pipe, she waved her hand, extinguishing the newborn

flame before flinging the spent match to the ground. A thin trail of smoke rose from the end of the pipe as she inhaled, which was followed by a small cloud from her mouth as she exhaled.

“But—I suppose that’s because the way I think is old,” said the girl with a chuckle as she crossed her legs, propping the elbow of her pipe arm on her knee and resting her other lazily around her waist. “So tell me, Miss—is this your first time visiting the park?”

“Y-Yes, I suppose so.” Renko’s answer was more of a reflex than a thought-out response.

“You don’t say. Well, in that case, why don’t I introduce you to an attraction fit for first-timers? How about it? From the look of it, your companion’s a first-timer too, and I’ve been meaning to take a ride myself, incidentally,” the girl said, before taking a pause to smoke. She smiled as the plume left her lips.

I’ve seen that smile before, Renko thought, as the back of her eye twitched. *But where? When?* She could not remember, and not only that: she could not shake the feeling she was looking not at a human, but a snake with its head reared high. Renko felt the vapor from her device burning in her throat before she realized she had triggered it. She inhaled again, and again, following the motions that had become so much a habit it hardly felt she was doing them, but rather riding the rails of some predetermined logic.

“It really is in terrible taste to use such a thing,” said the

girl in response to Renko's non-answer. "Intoxication is something you should enjoy leisurely. It is a waste of the fragrance to expend it in such a hurry," she cackled.

But the cackling fell faint on Renko's ears as she pulled the trigger on her vaporizer yet again. Finally, having calmed down enough for her breathing to resume its regular pace, she decided to interject.

"Umm. . ."

"Yes?"

"What *are* you?"

The girl's eyes widened for a split-second, but she immediately broke into a smile and laughed her usual croaky cackle.

"You ask a difficult question! I feel like the bedridden academic!"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, it's just a boring old story. A doctor comes to ask a bedridden academic, 'How are you feeling right now?' Your question's the same."

"I don't get it."

"The academic replied, 'I am feeling how difficult it is to exist,' Hilarious, right?"

Unable to find exactly what to laugh at, Renko brought her vaporizer to her mouth and inhaled again.

“I’ll save the answer to your question for after we’ve had some fun together,” the girl continued. “After all, it would be boorish of me to answer the question now.”

Follow me, the girl seemed to say, as she tapped the end of her pipe on the bench a second time, so that its contents melted into the night, before rising and walking on ahead.

Renko followed in her wake, and before she knew it, noticed Merry walking alongside her.

They did not have to walk very far before they reached the gate to the attraction, a saturated rainbow of color enclosed around a pitch black darkness looming within. It had a name, lettered in a font like melted candy, but, due in part to the illegibility of said font and how, for some reason, only that part of the gate was not well lit, Renko could not decipher it. But the girl traipsed right on through the entrance, so Renko and Merry followed.

As before, there were no staff to be seen. Renko was no expert on amusement parks, but she could not help but wonder, *Is this really what it is supposed to be like?*

They continued down a dim, cave-like corridor, bordered by a white painted railing on one side, beyond which lay a single-tracked rail. It was too dark to tell how far the track went, where it came from or where it led. At the end of the corridor, the railing gave way to five coaster-cars parked on the rail.

“If you don’t mind me asking...” said Renko.

“Yes?” replied the girl. She had just climbed into the front seat of the first car and pulled down a rectangular metal safety bar, which secured her shoulders and upper torso.

“What is this?” Renko asked.

“Did you not see?” the girl responded. As she turned to face Renko, her face showed a smile—and yet... “It’s a circus.”

“A circus?”

“Yes, a circus. It’s simple: all you have to do is climb in and the ride will take you on its course. The dolls along the way will perform a circus for us. That’s the nature of the show. Perfect for beginners, don’t you agree? There isn’t much else to an amusement park anyway.”

Renko and Merry followed the girl’s suit and climbed into seats behind her.

“Now, let the *Cirque du Paradis Artificiel*⁵ begin!”

Once both Renko and Merry were seated, a low-pitched siren rang and with a clunk, the coaster-car started off at a slow place. They were at once doused with an awfully cheery melody—the kind meant to humor children—but to Renko, it was oddly familiar.

The way it’s arranged, it’s hardly recognizable, Renko thought, but that’s one of Erik Satie’s Gymnopédies.

⁵Circus of Artificial Paradise

The coaster-car kept its sluggish pace as they continued through the dark tunnel, but when the tunnel ended, they were suddenly showered by the bright light of diodes spinning on wheels. Several dolls were dancing. Three—a girl with black hair, a girl with blonde hair and a boy with black hair—had linked arms and were dancing around in a circle. Multi-colored light beams streamed down from above. Pendulums here and there swung back and forth, and the organ played with no player.

The effect of all this sent itches crawling all over Renko's skin, and her mind echoed with the sound of rusted hinges swinging at her temples, but she could not reach her vaporizer; the metal safety bar was in the way.

The dolls were dancing—dancing around one other...

Composite Image

For whatever reason, whenever I hear the Gymnopédies, Renko thought as she listened to the sparse melody of the piece, I smell rain. She was not sure at what age she began to feel this way, but it seemed like an eternity ago. The hesitantly languid music filled the small café, a short walk from her university campus.

Renko raised her café au lait, letting its fragrance accompany the rain's, and looked across the window-side table at her friend Merry. Both had an open period between second and fourth that day and had come to the café to pass the time. It was not as if they had nothing to talk about, but they had expended the usual topics in the first thirty minutes of their time, so silence ensued.

Renko directed her attention back to herself, searching her mouth for leftover pieces of the sachertorte she had eaten too quickly, reminiscing its flavor whenever she found a fragment melting at the tip of her tongue.

"By the way..." Merry said as she set down her café vienne, waiting a moment to be sure she had Renko's attention, "About tonight... I won't be able to make it."

"Tonight? Oh... *that*."

A dingy bar had caught Renko's attention, due to the delicious smell of grilled entrails wafting from it whenever she walked by, and upon mentioning it to Merry, they both agreed to grab dinner there sometime. It was not a particularly urgent or significant date.

“I’m really sorry. Something just came up all of a sudden.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not as if the place is going out of business and we have to go now or never.”

“I really am sorry,” repeated Merry, her shoulders drooping. Renko chuckled a bit at her overreaction.

“Regardless of the gravity of the situation—or lack thereof—it’s rare of you to change your plans. Usually, when something comes up, you just ignore it.”

“I know, it’s just this time... it’s complicated.”

“Complicated?”

Merry let out a deep sigh and rubbed her temples, emanating profound annoyance.

“Yeah... ugh. You know how you have to be at least a sophomore to join the degree program I’m in?”

“I remember you telling me that.”

“Well, today the new cohort of sophomores had their first round of seminars, and one of our upperclassmen decided we should throw a welcome party for them...”

“You don’t seem very enthusiastic.”

“The welcome party itself isn’t the problem. It’s just that I really don’t get along well with the graduate student who is organizing the whole affair—he’s kind of forceful, you know? There were others who got out of it by saying they had plans, but... I just...”

“It would have been different if you had to go to work or something, but ‘I already have plans to go eat with a friend,’ didn’t really cut for him, huh?”

“Bingo. . . But honestly, if I had my way, I’d *never* eat with people I didn’t already know.”

“Well, It’s not like I can’t see why. Unlike me, I’m sure you’re pelted with questions.”

“It’s *awful*. I hope the food at least is alright.”

“If it’s good, tell me. I’ll add the restaurant to my list of places to go.”

“Even if it’s terrible, expect an earful. I’m sure I’ll have some steam to blow off.”

“Well I don’t need *that*.”

“Oh, come on. I’m always listening to you rant about something.”

“You are mistaken. I only discuss such matters of inconvenience to me in which I seek advice from you as a third person, in an honest attempt to improve the situation. What I do is constructive, a far cry from a lowly rant.”

“So the matter in which you stated you wanted kick the slacker in your assigned foreign language group to the moon and back was part of a constructive dialogue?”

“Absolutely. After consulting with you, I determined it was in my best interests to adopt a wait-and-see approach,

rather than acting on my instincts. Terribly constructive, no?”

“Isn’t your ‘wait-and-see approach’ by definition not constructive? Nothing changed.”

“Resigning oneself to one’s fate allows the resigner to analyze their situation with a clear head.”

“Analysis doesn’t do you any good if you don’t get any results from it.”

“It’s alright. I only have to deal with them for six more months.”

Merry must have realized that any more arguing was futile, because she pressed her fingers against her temples again and shook her head. She reached for her café vienne, which was already cold.

“Between that forceful upperclassman and you, my obstinately eccentric friend, why do I have to have such bad luck with people?”

“I feel *so* sorry for you,” Renko replied with a smile as she stirred her café au lait with a silver spoon. “But no, really, I do. It must be rough—though it’s hard for me to relate. I’m not often summoned to dinner parties.”

“You just don’t have any other friends.”

“That’s mighty presumptuous of you! I have a friend or two in my own department.”

“Is that so? Well, then, as a friend with friends, maybe you

can help me out. You see I have this *friend* who texts me *incessantly*—whenever they have the time—and I’m a bit worried they might not have any other friends. It’s been going on for days. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a clear case of no friends to me.”

“I’m talking about you, Renko.”

“Bunnies⁶ die when they get lonely.”

“If I might remind you, the one who told me, ‘It is detrimental to the psychological well-being of rabbits to keep several of them in close quarters, due to their territorial instincts,’ was *you*, Ms. Bun-Bun.”

“And here, I was just thinking, ‘Wow, you know? I’m kind of in the mood to listen to my friend complain about her problems,’ but all of a sudden—poof! That feeling is gone! Weird.”

“Renkooo!” Merry’s wail was convincing.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Renko replied, picking up her café au lait. “No one wants to hear you cry.” As Renko gulped the famously mild drink down, she glanced out the window at the faint white half-moon in the blue autumn sky. “It’s almost time for class.”

“You’re right,” said Merry, as she flipped over her left wrist and glanced at the watch-face there encircled in jade, and without looking, reached for her purse with her other hand.

⁶Usami Renko’s surname sounds similar to the Japanese word for rabbit. The saying is also a common phrase.

Renko took that cue to pull the large black bag she had with her onto her shoulder. She then grabbed her portable terminal device and raised it over a small monitor located on the table until it pinged, showing the results of the transaction. Once she confirmed her portion had been paid, Renko left her seat in a single flowing motion. She did not wait for Merry, but Merry did not take long to catch up to her.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you. . .”

“Hmm?”

Merry pointed at Renko’s bag. It was large for her—for any woman—concealing half of her back, and had the equally objectionable quality of being all black. If she weren’t a woman the lack of fashion might have been acceptable, but as things were, Renko stuck out like a sore thumb.

“What happened to your usual shoulder bag?”

“Oh, that. You know how it rained yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I got my bag wet, and the next thing I know, there’s mold growing in it.”

“I guess that’s reason enough to use another bag, but Renko, you couldn’t find anything more. . . feminine to carry with you? I mean, really.”

“What are you talking about? This Craiston shoulder bag is amazing! It won last year’s Good Design Prize for its

functional beauty. Its most notable feature is in the design of the shoulder strap. No matter how much you put in the bag it doesn't strain your shoulder at all—and above all else the sheer amount of stuff you can fit in this thing is—

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything," said Merry, raising both hands in the air in a show of defeat.

"As long as you understand." As they left the café, a crisp breeze swept past them, and Renko felt it paw at the back of her neck.

The path they took was a straight shot back to campus. As they walked over the white tiled pavement, Renko could not help but feel a sense of unspoken rejection from the scene as it lay under the autumn sky. It might have had something to do with the fact the road it followed ran through a quiet residential district, but she couldn't put her finger on why. Merry walked at her side, just out of arm's reach. *At this time of day*, Renko thought, *there should be more people around*. It was common to see other students walking up and down the path, but they were completely alone. Renko could hear cars off in the distance, and the songs of birds she could not hope to name, but otherwise it was silent—silent enough for the vibrations of her feet hitting the tiles to grow into a raucous chorus coursing up her back.

Their walk continued wordlessly. They had said a lot at the café after all, Renko reasoned, but still she lingered on the fact not a single syllable seemed willing to offer itself to her to speak it. So instead, Renko reached into the pocket of her jacket and took out her vaporizer. In a single simultaneous

motion, she put its mouthpiece into her mouth, pulled the trigger and inhaled the blue-tinted smoke. It had been a while since her last smoke, and she could feel that particular weight of mild intoxication-after-abstinence fall lightly on her shoulders.

“I can’t say I approve.”

“I know,” said Renko with a slight, guilty smile as she let a wisp of smoke escape her mouth, but she brought her vaporizer to her mouth for another smoke and let her eyes follow a passing car away from Merry’s face. She squinted slightly as the light of the sun caught the film of smoke and continued to inhale when—

“Well if it isn’t Miss Hearn!”

The voice came from ahead. Renko pulled her distracted gaze back to see a smiling young man with short hair waving in their direction.

“Oh, hi.”

Merry’s voice was stilted. Renko glanced over to see an obviously fake smile plastered over her face. *Ah*, Renko thought with a grimace, *this must be the grad student she was talking about.*

“You friends?” the man said, looking at Renko.

Renko gave a slight nod (as a baseline courtesy).

“It’s a rare sight to see a girl like you smoking tobacco.”

“You think so?”

“It’s rare enough to see anyone smoke at all. I think it’s kinda fresh.”

“Well, everyone’s concerned about their health these days.”

“You know, I was thinking about giving it a go myself. Do you have any recommendations?”

“I’m not the best person to ask. You’re probably better off sampling something at one of the cigarette bars.”

“Oh! Now that’s a good idea! Let me know if you know of any good ones.”

“Right.”

“So are you gonna join us for the welcome party tonight?”

“We’re not in the same department.”

“Who cares? No one will complain. The more girls the better!”

His voice wound on like a spinning reel of fishing line, and Renko winced at the sound, imagining a pin-cushion full of needles pointed outward rolling around inside her skull. She took a deep breath of smoke to try and dull the sensation.

“I’m sorry, I have a shift to work tonight.”

“Really? That’s too bad. Well, we’ll just have to get a bite to eat some other time then.”

“If I’m not busy.”

“I’m sorry, but if we don’t leave soon, we will be late for class,” said Merry, finally cutting in.

“Oh, all right then. I’ll see you later!” the man said, raising one hand in farewell as he turned and walked back the way he came.

Renko released less of a sigh and more of a dry heave.

“I sense stormy seas in your future, Sailor.”

“Tell me about it, Captain,” replied Merry, following suit.

Inserted Image

Renko did not actually have any plans that night.

Instead she stood by herself, waiting for her train to arrive at her platform, fiddling with her vaporizer. The moon was aloft in the sky, lonely among just a few stars. Some twenty years ago, a campaign aimed at restoring the night sky was successful in passing measures to clamp down on light pollution, and the light from the city was greatly dimmed to those standards. Of course, no one was suggesting that street and guide lamps be extinguished, but storefront signage and advertisements were strictly regulated by their lux output, and thanks to these efforts—or so Renko was told, time and time again—the night sky was returned to its former glory. Regardless, from Renko's perspective, the sky was the same as it had always been, and the more her schoolteachers asserted she could never understand how valuable her sky was, the more inclined she was to think the whole story was something the adults made up to tell her off. *I'm sure they believed it*, Renko thought, as she stared at the starlight, *but if I cannot judge the worth of this sky for not knowing one with even less light, how can they, without knowing the ancient, untouched sky?*

6:45:30 PM, a little over two minutes before the next train arrives.

Renko walked over to a bench on the edge of the empty platform and sat down, slinging her shoulder bag onto the empty space beside her, before bringing her vaporizer to her mouth for a smoke.

Renko did not remember when she formed the habit. Like the logic in a dream, the steps leading up to it were clouded and she was unsure. What she *was* sure of was that now, whenever the time to do so presented itself, she smoked. The gnawing impatience she felt when she did not, was not something she thought anyone who had not experienced it first-hand could understand, and she was at a complete loss to break down and rationalize the feeling, even for her own sake.

“I can’t say I approve of you smoking one of those on the platform.”

The source of the whispered voice was close to Renko’s ear.

On the periphery of her vision, thin strands of blonde hair swayed in the breeze. The hair’s luster was similar to her friend Merry’s, but its length, tied up with red cords, was short. As Renko turned to face the girl who whispered in her ear, and saw her leaning into the arm rest on the end of the bench, engulfed in her frilly outfit, Renko could not help but think she seemed. . . cat-like.

A disorderly stream of smoke billowed out into the air across Renko’s field of vision.

The girl’s rounded child’s fingers handled a long, slender, pole-like object, brownish in color. *What was it?* The tip of it glowed with a red light, and let off a crackling, along with continuous wisps of bluish smoke. The scent of it was bitter sweet. It lightly stung Renko’s eyes, and she felt herself tear up somewhat. *A kiseru. That’s right. That’s*

what it is. Renko's thoughts did not follow through any further, nor did she think to speak. Even if she wanted to, she couldn't find any words to say. There was something—something there, a dry clicking and clacking looped upon itself in a web of noise beneath her temple. Disgust crawled every which way in the space between her skin and muscles, demanding an attention that dominated her mind. *Inhale. Exhale. Consume the smoke. Let it fill you. Only then can you forget. Once you are out, light another round. It's a cycle—a simple cycle, and an endless one.*

"Say, Miss—Why don't I tell you about a peculiar little worm?" said the girl with a chuckle.

Renko could see the color of her voice—alcoholic, surely infused with some kind of wine—and it tickled in the way some stings do as it dripped into the depths of her ear.

"The worm in question is one of those that can't live its life alone. Alone, it just can't manage, you see? So first, it worms its way into the gills of a certain fish. From there, it creeps into the body and makes a home in the fish's brain."

The girl paused to bring the tip of her pipe into her mouth, and took a long draw. Renko was certain she heard her swallow. When the girl's thin, sappanwood-colored lips finally parted, the wisped air released between them carried notes of a fragrance that was similar, but markedly unlike the signature smell Renko's vaporizer provided.

"In its new home, the worm sets up shop and gets to work manufacturing a certain chemical—a type of

neurotransmitter—which it releases into the rest of the brain. The purpose of this substance is to make the fish lose its grasp on what is supposed to be normal. It destroys the autonomous nerve centers tasked with swimming and leaves its instincts bare. What swimming means, to the broken fish, becomes thrashing about near the river’s surface, belly up for all the outside world to see. What do you think happens next?”

Renko continued to stare, in a daze, so the girl came closer and whispered in her ear.

“What do you think is the greatest threat to a fish?”

“Birds,” Renko answered quietly, but mechanically.

“Correct. Normally, to protect themselves from birds—the devilish flying demons—the fish swims closer to the river bottom.”

Another puff of exhaled smoke clouded Renko’s field of view. The mouthpiece on her vaporizer was stained brown, likely a result of her constant use of it. The saliva clinging to it caught the light of the lamps shining on the platform and returned a sticky glimmer.

“Indeed,” the girl continued, “for our fish, swimming belly up near the surface is nothing short of suicide. So in essence, this worm infects the fish in order to make it commit suicide. Why, you ask? To live. The true habitat the worm needs to thrive is found only in the gut of a bird. Therefore, the worm’s first host must be eaten by one. For that purpose and that purpose alone, the worm destroys the fish’s sense

of equilibrium and drives it to commit suicide⁷.”

The moon reappeared beyond the smoky veil.

6:46:58 PM

Renko could see headlights hovering in the distance above the railway, plowing through the black of the enveloping night.

“Well, that’s enough for today. I’ll see you later, Miss.”

By the time the train pulled into the station, all signs the girl had been there were gone, leaving Renko alone on the otherwise empty platform.

Renko reached for her bag, slowly pulled it onto her shoulder, stuffed her vaporizer into her pocket and boarded the train. It was more congested than she thought it would be. Maybe she would have done better to catch the train another time. As there was nowhere to sit, Renko shuffled over and grabbed a vacant hanging strap to stabilize herself. The train swayed as it clanked along the tracks. She looked at her half-transparent reflection in the window glass, overlaying the nighttime cityscape. It looked as if she had some sort of stain on her left cheek. It was soft to the touch. She pressed on it harder. It warped some under the stress, but otherwise did not respond. *I wonder if it’s a pimple*, Renko thought. She pressed on it more. *I know I’m not the healthiest eater, but I’ve been trying to eat more vegetables lately...* After some more prodding, she began to scratch at it, and the

⁷The parasite *Euhaplorchis Californiensis* closely matches this description.

round blemish burst. A red droplet ran down her cheek to her jawline. Renko did not wipe it. She only continued to stare at her reflection in the silicate glass. She noticed her mouth was slightly open as she watched the streetlamps behind her. Her thinking felt clouded, as if a mist were hanging in her brain.

A kiseru, Renko thought suddenly. *Yes, that's what it is called. Now I remember. It's strange to see such a rare thing...* Renko thought nothing more, as if her skull had been emptied out.

Renko registered the name of a train station as the pressure waves from the announcement vibrated her eardrum. *This is my stop*, thought Renko, but before she could think it, her body was already in motion. She felt like she walking through water at the bottom of a pool. The viscosity of the air was thick and clung to her limbs as she moved, but this did not stop her. She passed the ticket gate and took a left. There were so many people, coming and going, but she couldn't see any of their faces well. They looked like the mosaics of old stained glass windows, all subtle features indistinct.

Even so, she walked. She kept walking.

As she walked, she noticed the bar she had planned to visit with Merry. There was nothing stopping her from going alone; Merry would not mind. Nevertheless, Renko's feet carried her onward. *Let me tell you a story about a bag—or rather, the story of a man controlled by his bag.* So her automated steps directed her home.

Renko spotted a bug zapper flickering. Countless flies and two moths danced around it. *No matter how you attempt to steal light back for the night...* She cut herself off. *Well, this is what you get when you build castles on foundations of pretense: a farce. Surely, its flickering is timed to average within regulations—to average between use and appearances, under the notion of equilibrium and balance. But in the end, it is a manufactured problem to deal with another manufactured problem.* The device continued its cyclical flickering, unaware. Renko had been lectured on the ills of hypocrisy in her youth, but all she had was hypocrisy. It was what she grew up with and all she knew.

By the time Renko came out of her thoughts, she was at the door to her building, and then the door to her apartment.

Renko pulled out her card key and inserted it into a slot under the door knob. The locking mechanism was so ancient, the uninitiated were hardly likely to have read about how one worked, let alone encounter one in the wild, but Renko's apartment was just that old. The device beeped, and the lock clicked open. In a similarly automated fashion, Renko opened the door, and walked inside.

The door locked automatically behind her as she shut it, and the lights came on, illuminating the entryway in a milky-white glow. A narrow hallway extended from the entryway to the six-and-a-half mat⁸ multi-purpose living, dining and bedroom, with space on the left for the kitchen and two doors on the right for the toilet and bathroom.

⁸approximately 10 square meters, or 107 square feet.

Renko removed her shoes and walked slowly down the hall. There was a pile of unwashed dishes in the sink, and her resin cutting board had dark red stains in its crevices, a sign it had not been soaked for some time. The same could be said of the manual meat grinder set beside it. It was so covered in flakes of flesh you could not tell what color it was supposed to be. Apart from that, the kitchen counter was littered with vaping cartridges. Some were open, the brown sticky substance within exposed to the air, with leakage hardened into clumps on the counter's stainless steel surface. It looked like mold. A few flies flew about, but strangely, Renko did not smell anything.

Renko slid open the door to the main room. It was not a large room to begin with, and between the countless books, bags of fast food containers and empty vaping cartridges strewn about, there was hardly space to stand, let alone walk, but with a practiced gait used to the chaos, Renko quickly made it to her bed in the corner of the room and collapsed upon it. Without sitting up, she wriggled out of her jacket and tossed it onto the pile of rubble. Then, hanging off the bed, she retrieved her handheld terminal and vaporizer from its pockets. The bag, for all she had bragged about it to Merry, sat at the center of a whirlpool of books. After retrieving the items from her jacket, Renko flipped over onto her back and put the mouthpiece of her vaporizer in her mouth.

As she smoked, she felt the vapor stain her body as it traveled down her throat. Renko's terminal was ringing. *What is it now?* Renko thought, but her consciousness was

already fading, and soon it fell deep into the abyss of sleep.
Outside her window, unbeknownst to her, it began to rain.

Slow and Sadly, or Bureaucratic Sonatina⁹

As the ride progressed, the coaster-car continued its languid march upon the rails, wheels clanking over the rail-joints as they delivered rhythmic jolts to their passengers. The path followed an awfully drawn-out arc, swimming in a circus of oversaturated colors. The music remained stale despite the offensively cheerful timbre of its notes, and muddled as if they were listening from underwater. Renko could not pick out the details of the melody, but knew from shifts she could not pin down that the *Gymnopédies*' first piece had ended and the second begun. Dolls danced and pendulums swung, but as Renko looked upon the ride's incomprehensible play, nothing could distract her from the itch she felt consuming her left arm.

Abruptly, the colorization of the scene shifted.

All went white. In the center sat a single bed, around which fake sweets were dancing. There were shortcakes, chocolate gâteaux, apple pies, mont blancs and cheese tarts, all intricate and decorated with brown ribbons tied in bows, fastened with long, thin, green plastic sticks.

"Now then, the circus has begun its second act. Whatever will it show us next?"

The girl's voice crept into Renko's ear like a spider dripping with sweet nectar.

⁹Lent et Triste, or Sonatine Bureaucratique. The former is the playing instructions for Erik Satie's *Gymnopédie* No. 2, and the latter is the title of Erik Satie's pastiche of Muzio Clementi's *Sonatina* Op. 36 No. 1.

Composite Image

Renko did not have class until that afternoon, but she woke up earlier than expected, and found herself, soon after, sipping a café au lait at her and Merry's usual haunt, alone. Her time may have been better spent elsewhere, but, she reasoned, she had nothing better to do, and the missed calls she received the previous night weighed heavily on her mind.

Renko *had* called back—four times, in fact—and sent a text-mail message, but her handheld terminal remained silent as she fiddled with it in her hand, staring out the window in a daze, waiting for a reply. The sun had not fully risen into the sky, and the moon was still visible. 11:37:45 AM. Renko's lips went through the motions as she muttered the time, but the sound did not fully escape her throat. A crowd of students passed outside the window. *There are an awful lot of them today*, Renko thought. The café was empty but for her, and no reply from Merry came to break the stillness.

Late the previous night, Renko awoke to find her terminal, left tossed in the corner of her bed, flashing with notifications. With no temptation fall back asleep, she reached through the environment of flashing outlines to retrieve it. Her terminal informed her of five missed calls, and one text-mail message received. All were from her friend, Merry. The calls were spaced three minutes apart, and the text-mail message, which arrived two minutes after the last call, was addressed with no body or heading.

It was unusual, and Renko could not shake the feeling something was wrong. She immediately called back, but was only met by the standard out-of-service message: “The number you have dialed cannot be reached, due to the device being in a powered down state or inadequate service area.” After her fourth call, Renko sent a follow-up text: “Did something happen?”

It had been hours since Renko’s last attempt to contact Merry. *Any more would be overdoing it*, Renko tried to reassure herself, and looked back at her still steaming café au lait. She took it and drank the rest in one gulp. It scorched her throat on the way down and her stomach felt like it would boil over. *There isn’t any cause for alarm*. She slung her cup back onto the table with disgust and brought her freed hand back up to her temple. She scratched, then combed through her hair before thunking her elbow on the table and pressing her forehead against her hand as she stared down at her lock-screen—her static, notification-free lock-screen.

After a while, Renko felt for her vaporizer, which she had left on the table, and took a smoke. Once she inhaled, she flung her body against the back of the chair and looked up at the ceiling. There was a four-bladed fan right above her, spinning so slow as to be useless for anything other than decoration—but still it spun, around and around. Renko continued to smoke as she followed the path of the blades with her eyes, turning like the raucous gears in her brain. *No matter how I try, whenever I stop, I...*

Mid-smoke, the trail of vapor cut out.

Without removing the vaporizer from her mouth, Renko used her free hand to release the latch at the bottom so the empty cartridge would slide out. After it fell into her hand, she slung it across the table and reached into her bag, without looking, for a new one, but as she as she clicked the replacement into place. . .

“Excuse me.”

When Renko looked up, she saw an uncomfortable-looking waiter standing at her table.

“No smoking is allowed inside the café.”

Renko nodded ever so slightly in response, but did not say a word. Instead, she took her frustratingly idle terminal and swept it across the monitor to pay for her bill, hoisted her bag onto her shoulder and stood up from the table.

Renko’s bag was supposedly engineered to distribute its weight and reduce shoulder strain, but it felt terribly heavy on her shoulders, and Renko loathed every step she had to take, imagining someone had pumped lead into her veins.

The bell on the door rang as she made her way through. Outside the café, life, as it were, carried on. No one paid Renko any mind, focused instead on the lives dealt them: some laughed, other kept their heads down, some looked grave and others happy, but they and their lives progressed all the same. It was so ordinary in the outside world Renko could not help but feel left behind. Even the tiled pavement

seemed reluctant to ground her steps as she waded through the mess of life that swept around her.

It isn't normal for this to get this bad, thought Renko, feeling the vast distance between her and everything else, but acknowledging the exception did nothing to make it go away. She focused on walking. *Walk... Just walk...*

“Hey there!”

The voice came from behind, so Renko turned around. She easily recognized the face, although they had just met the day before.

“Oh, hi,” Renko muttered.

“You’re one of Miss Hearn’s friends, right?”

“Yeah...?”

Renko did not put any effort into her speaking: her words could reasonably mistaken for voiced breaths. However, the instigator of the conversation did not pay her reluctance any mind, closing in on Renko with his fake smile plastered on his face.

“I take it you don’t have class until this afternoon?”

“That’s correct... ”

“Then why don’t we grab some lunch together?”

“Well, I’ve got to stop by the library, so... ”

“C’mon, I’m sure you have time to get a bite to eat!”

Renko grabbed her vaporizer and took a smoke, savoring the interruption as it traveled down her throat. After a short pause, she released the puff of smoke into the air above her.

“No. Honestly, I have a report I have to finish right now.”

“Really now? That’s too bad. You must take your studies pretty seriously then, huh?”

Renko had to fight herself from scoffing at that incorrect appraisal, but the feeling quickly faded as Merry’s unfortunate acquaintance began to pass her.

“By the way, about Mer—I mean Hearn...”

“Hm?”

“Do you know if she was able to get home all right, after the party last night?”

Upon hearing Renko’s question, the fake smile that had been preserved throughout the rest of their conversation twisted into a sly grin, tinged with the same kind of disdain Renko had just fought to hold back.

“Oh, about that... She had a little too much to drink last night, I’m afraid. I expect she won’t make it home until later today...or maybe even tomorrow.”

“I see...”

Upon hearing that explanation, Renko resumed walking. *One foot...and then the other...*

Inserted Image

Everyone has gaps within themselves.

No one can survive without others, but life can only be lived alone. Everyone has gaps within themselves, without exception, and they try to fill them.

The smell of sweat in the air is thick enough to be repulsing, so I turn over in the damp bedding. I watch as a pillow, dislodged from my movement, tumbles from the bed to the floor.

I stretch my arm outward, without raising my body, extending my fingers to their limit. I know I will not reach my aim, but still, for some reason. . .

Everyone has gaps within themselves.

Though we may hold hands. Though we may lie with each other.

I stretch my arm outward. It is not as if the base of my neck is lonely for support, nor do I honestly desire a peaceful slumber. I am only— only just—trying to fill the gaps inside me. Be it with inoffensive music, be it with a decorative string of words, be it with images devoid of meaning, I try to fill the gaps, as if stuffing them with shredded strips of paper.

I think I hear my name being called.

Someone's lips press against mine.

My tongue is sucked on, then my lips and nipples, haphazardly. I feel hands on my small breasts, a penis thrust into vagina... I'm impaled. A numbness climbs my spine. It's so repetitive, the act—out and in, in and out. I must be paralyzed from the waist down. The stimulus, pleasure and pain, feels so distant. My body reacts to the repetitive input, but my consciousness is detached, floating in the shallowest pool between dreams and reality.

I stretch my arm outward. My left hand is pinned down on the bedsheets, fingers tangled with his the way lovers do it, but against my will. I cannot move it, so I reach my unchained right around his back towards the ceiling. It is not that I want peace or comfort—only, don't they always say? "If you count the stains on the ceiling, before you know it, things like this will be over and done with."

Then tell me, someone, anyone. I already know there are four-hundred fifty seven stains on this ceiling. There aren't any more now—nor any less—than there were earlier. I know, because I have counted four times already. I've done my part, so answer me.

Everyone has gaps within themselves. They may feel lonely or sad. They may feel pains of love or longing. They feel dependant or fear solitude. Won't someone tell me? Won't anyone tell me?

What meaning is there in this repetitive act?

I cannot say I was not longing for something. I was the one who was lonely. I was the one who was sad. I was the one

who wanted to feel the pains of love. I was the one who wanted to feel the pains of longing. I was the one who could not bear to be alone.

Someone tell me.

Everyone has gaps within themselves. There is no getting around that. But why did I feel I must fill them?

I stretch out my right arm, reaching for the ceiling.

Won't someone please tell me?

What am I...?

Composite Image

Renko stood at the entrance to Merry's apartment building.

Three days had passed since their last communication—three whole days of silence. Renko had attempted to call Merry back several times, but each attempt ended in the same pre-recorded message restating the inaccessibility of Merry's terminal device. *No one can blame me for wanting to check*, Renko thought as she rode the train in.

Renko looked up at the blue sky, with its white moon and sporadic stars. 7:38:15 AM, the current time flashed in the back of her mind. Renko punched in Merry's room number at a console in front of the automatic glass doors of the building. A call-tone rang several times, but no one answered. Renko input the room number again, and again no one answered. During the fourth attempt, the ringing was cut short, and the door unlocked. Renko walked through the automatic doors, straight to the elevator lobby. Merry lived on the fifth floor—one of the higher floors of the building. Renko pressed the UP button in the lobby and a set of doors opened for her, sooner than expected. Renko climbed into the elevator and pressed the button for the fifth floor. The doors closed, and the sound of strained cables faintly reached her ears.

"So we meet again, Miss."

The elevator was not exactly spacious, and Renko assumed she was alone when she entered, but contrary to her expectations, a girl now seemed to accompany her. Renko

looked over the girl's blonde hair tied up with red cords, her white shirt and black skirt with alternating layers of black and red, and followed the trail of smoke creeping about the compartment back to the long brown pipe held between the girl's fingers.

"Say, Miss—Why don't I tell you today about a peculiar kind of mold?" said the girl with a chuckle, smiling in shades of night.

"The mold in question first finds a foothold in the larva of a moth. There, it multiplies. It continues to multiply until it breaks into the host's visual cortex, and steals its sight. How do you think the blinded larva responds?"

The elevator climbed from the second to the third floor as it continued upwards.

"The blinded larva, climbs up and up, higher and higher, in search of the light it lost. You see, it desires light, much like the man who killed god. In the end, it climbs up the highest branches of a tree, and at the highest point it can reach, it dies. It dies, without having done anything for itself, without having become anything. After death, even as the larva's corpse begins to dry up, the mold still multiplies."

From the third floor, the elevator rose to the fourth.

"Finally, the dessicated corpse cracks and bursts open. Nothing becomes of the corpse pieces, but the mold takes flight upon the wind, riding its currents to find another moth larva to infect—and the cycle continues."

A light indicated the elevator had arrived at the fifth floor.

“Well, that’s enough for today. I’ll see you later, Miss.”

Renko darted out of the elevator in mind, but her body followed her escape at the pace of a crawl. Still, she hurried as best she could to her friend Merry’s room, even as it felt like she was following the path of a predetermined circuit.

Room 503.

Renko put her hand on the doorknob and turned. It was unlocked. As much as Renko wanted to object to Merry’s carelessness, she took advantage of the situation to enter.

Renko had visited Merry’s apartment several times before. The layout was similar to her own. A hallway extended from the entrance to the main room, with access to the kitchen on the left and separate doors for the bath and toilet to the right. The size of the rooms was the main difference, and the fact that this one included a loft, but otherwise their apartments were basically the same—insofar as they could be with Merry’s building well kept and modern, and Renko’s barely standing.

There was some background noise: *water*.

As soon as Renko identified the sound, she threw open the door to the bath and was met by a pool of red that covered the floor. The water was left on, and out of the shower-head it continued to pour over Merry’s damp shoulders. She was pale in the face, naked and slumped against the wall. A razor lay by her right hand, accompanied by a deep gash

in her left thigh. Red flowed out of the gash, soaking the area between her legs before being carried away by the flow of the water to be spread across the tiled floor. The flow out of the gash had already slowed to a trickle, but in the steam of the shower, Renko saw Merry's shoulders twitch and shiver every so often, and the smell of rot and rust—of life—was still strong in the air.

“Merry?”

Merry did not answer.

Renko noticed Merry's handheld terminal, submerged in the mixture of water and blood. It had no signs of life. Water continued to flow. The drain was clogged with coagulated clumps of blood, and it frothed with intermittent overflow—swallowing, then vomiting.

“Merry?” Renko tried calling her name again. She had frozen in place where she stood.

No answer.

Renko lunged forward and tried to check Merry's pulse, her fingers at her neck. It was faint, but it was there. The water from the shower-head drenched them both.

“Merry!” Renko shouted. She shook Merry's shoulders, but her dull stare remained lifeless.

“Merry!” Renko shouted again, as if she had no other words in her vocabulary.

The blood began to stain Renko's black skirt. Her body

was incredibly heavy.

Deep in the womb, *something* spun itself around in a spiral.

Related Image

Back in the elevator lobby, the girl with the pipe sat down on the ground by the steel doors and blew out a puff of smoke from her lips.

“You look like you’re having fun.”

The stage suffered a sudden intrusion—in the form of a young woman with amber-colored hair. She wore a faint smile and an outdated suit with white silk gloves, which further accentuated the thin cigar she held between her fingers. The smoke from it swirled in a path between the two as it spread its reach through the hall.

“I *am*. It *is* fun, Yakumo. After all, you rarely find such taste within your boundaries.”

“I should think so. I’ve done all I can to drive that garbage out.”

“I don’t doubt it,” the girl replied with a deep-throated cackle. “It has been ages since I last witnessed such red and black filth. . .” She paused to draw a drag from her pipe and looked up at the woman, the edges of her mouth curled up in a smile, teeming with spilled smoke.

“I won’t let you interfere with my fun—not yet.”

Composite Image

Merry was released from the hospital only a few days after Renko found her. Apparently, the extent of Merry's blood loss was not as bad as it first seemed—so Renko was told anyway, although she could not remember the full account the hospital gave her; that did not matter.

Renko sat on the lone sofa in Merry's room and held her vaporizer to her mouth. Merry lay motionless on her bed. She had not so much as twitched since being brought back to her apartment, her hands tied with nylon ropes to the bedposts. If she were untied, it might happen again.

Renko did not know why. Merry did not tell her. In fact, nothing Merry said made any sense at all, and she would repeat the same nonsense over and over, leaving Renko nothing she needed to piece together any of the details she wanted to know. Apart from this occasional interaction, Merry only stared at the ceiling, for hours on end.

"Renko?" Merry's voice was marred by dehydration.

"Yes?" Renko responded.

"The white stuff won't come off."

Here we go again, thought Renko. "What white stuff?"

"It's white, but also a little greyish and little yellowish, and it fills up my insides. It fills up my insides and overflows. Then, I notice my arms have become those things men have, and my legs turn into them too."

“Uh-huh.”

“Then, the white stuff flows out of me—out of the tips of my arms and legs and out of middle. It chokes me coming out of my throat. Renko, right now, I am in the shallowest place between dreams and boundaries, overflowing. As I overflow, I’m unable to breathe. Renko, I wonder, am I the beginning, or am I the end? No—surely I’m neither, for I am a sphere.”

“Uh-huh.”

“The sphere splits in two, two halves equal to the original—you can do that with spheres¹⁰. My body is turning into the thing men have dangling between their legs. My boundaries are dissolving. Renko, the white stuff won’t come off. No matter how I try to wash it away, it won’t come off.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Renko? I wonder where I am. Do you know? I can see a shrine.”

“Uh-huh.”

“There’s a shrine, and a goddess. The goddess is smiling. ‘Welcome,’ she says, laughing. She won’t stop smiling. She keeps smiling, and tells me I have something black and something red stuck to me. But how can that be? I’m white. The white stuff won’t come off. Maybe it’s more grey than white, or more yellow, but it won’t come off.

¹⁰The Banach-Tarski Paradox describes a situation in set-theory where a single sphere can be split into two spheres equal to the original.

Renko, now matter how I try to wash it away, it won't come off."

"Uh-huh."

"Renko?"

Merry's nonsense continued.

Renko was not so oblivious to the obvious that she had no idea what might have happened to her friend, but she did not hold the truth in her hands. *As always*, she thought as she rose slowly to her feet, *no one who can ever says anything, so I have nothing to work with*. She walked past Merry, who carried on without her; opened the door to the kitchen and made her way to the refrigerator. Inside, on a plate, was a chocolate gâteau. She took it out and brought it to the counter. Renko could still hear Merry babbling in the other room.

After setting the cake, plate and all, on a cutting board, Renko reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a vaporizer cartridge. She then clasped her hand around the bottom of the cartridge, twisted until its metal cap came off, and began to pour the sticky brown substance it contained onto the cake. Although the substance was not solid enough to resist deforming under its own weight, like honey, it was so viscous, it took ages for it to drip unto the cake. Content with half of the cartridge's content emptied unto the cake, Renko replaced the metal cap, took the plate in her hand and returned to the main room.

"Renko? The—"

“Merry,” Renko said, cutting her off.

As Renko approached, she began stirring together bits of the cake and its topping with a spoon. Exposed to the warm air of the room, the cake itself, oozing with chocolate, had become more fluid, and mixed easily on the plate with foreign addition.

“You like chocolate gâteau, don’t you?” said Renko, raising a spoonful of the formless cake-*like* substance to Merry’s mouth.

Although Merry continued to stare off into the distance in a daze, she did part her lips and accept the spoon into her mouth. Renko listened as the bits of cake slowly squished and smacked against her teeth and tongue until they were finally swallowed.

“Renko?”

“Come on, eat up. I have lots more for you here,” Renko interrupted, with a second spoonful ready.

With nothing else to compete, the squishing and smacking sounds Merry made as she consumed each spoonful of cake filled the room, and after every mouthful, Renko was ready with the next: the third, the fourth, the fifth. . .

Finally, after Merry’s eighth bite, she spoke up again.

“Renko?”

“Yes, Merry?”

“This is good.”

"I'm glad to hear that. I was sure you would like it."

"You know? Right now, I feel... really happy. Who would have thought, eating cake could make you feel so happy? Renko, I see boundaries. I'm in the deepest place, where both dreams and reality bubble up out of nothing. It's wonderful. I see light. I must rise to meet it, Renko. I must go up."

"That's great. Would you like another bite?"

"Yes please. Your cake is very delicious."

Ten spoonfuls led to twenty, and soon half of the cake was gone.

"Renko?"

"Yes, Merry?"

"I was raped."

No surprise there... Renko thought numbly.

"I was... for three whole days, I think. No... it may have only been a few hours... but really—I was just so lonely, you know? I don't really have any friends either, so I was happy to feel needed. I was happy to think someone might like someone like me. Renko... do you think I could be falling in love? What do you think, Renko?"

"I think you should have more cake. There's plenty more, right here."

"Thank you, Renko. You're the best."

“Right back at you.”

Once Merry had finished three quarters of the cake, she fell asleep.

Renko set the plate down on a low table and tried to find a more comfortable position in her chair as she pulled out her vaporizer and began to smoke. The room lurched, and she felt as if the puffs of smoke clouding her vision were a curtain of fog someone else had pulled over her eyes.

Something is off... Renko thought. *An image... It feels like an image is being inserted directly into my brain... The boundaries Merry can sense between illusions and reality and fantasy must be growing indistinct... The ground feels wavy beneath my feet, like the surface of a slime... It itches. My left arm itches... It itches so much...*

Renko rolled up her shirt sleeve and began to scratch her arm, without pausing to take the vaporizer out of her mouth. She scratched and scratched, but her itch was not satisfied. Soon four inflamed red lines extended from her wrist to her elbow, which bubbled up in rash-like sores.

Frustrated, Renko looked aside from her arm and noticed something on the bare concrete wall of the room—a periwinkle blue... creature of some sort. It took a moment, but Renko recognized the creature—she had seen something similar depicted in a reference book before. Its slick and slimy skin, its elongated shape, and the fact it was difficult to identify exactly where its head or eyes were—all pointed to it being some kind of planarian. It had a single line

that ran the length of its back, which swelled on either side like lips. A long fifteen centimeter long tongue hung out of its lazily parted mouth, swaying back and forth like a pendulum—but other than its swinging tongue, the creature was not exactly moving. It just lay there, plastered to the wall.

It won't stop itching... Ugh... Renko scratched, and scratched some more. The itch was more than she could handle.

Distracted as she was, Renko did not notice the planarian creature's elongated tongue sling out towards her until it had wrapped around her raw left arm. But just as soon as it had, a crashing sound erupted from the wall, as if someone had knocked over a case of porcelain. The creature's skin was inflamed, swelling like a giant keloid. It shriveled, cracked, crumbled and ruptured, oozing a milky jade blood and pus.

Ugh! It itches! It itches so much! Especially where it touched the tongue!

The creature continued to crack and pop as it slid slowly from the wall to the floor, leaving a trail of green blood in its wake, like the mucus of a creeping slug. When it finally reached the floor with a splat, it split into pieces along the cracks, each piece oozing more slime onto the floor in a slow-moving flood. By time the oozing flood had reached Renko's left foot, her left arm was assaulted with another round of an even stronger itch.

Renko tore at the rash, pus exploding from the sores, staining her arm white. Still, Renko scratched. Even as the pus hardened and her arm swelled like the creature did before her, she continued to scratch and tear. Her skin fell off in sheets, exposing the muscle tissue beneath. Between the countless threads of muscle were countless crabs squirming in a storm of clacking noise. The itch only grew stronger. Renko tore at her remaining skin, and it crumbled away.

I'm filled with crabs—crabs squirming around inside of me...
Renko thought as she smoked. She kept smoking, but the crabs...

Finally, overloaded with the mass of her urges, Renko slammed her arm down upon the table with a splat.

Related Image

In the lobby of the hospital, an unmanned piano played Erik Satie's Gymnopédies—over and over again. Renko stared at it listlessly, as bored children, with nothing better to do, ran in circles around it.

The results of the examination she held loosely in her hands left no room for doubt.

Six months of fetal existence earns a child recognition of its human rights. No longer is its purging treated like the removal of an unwanted tumor, or its accidental loss an unfortunate affliction upon the would be mother. Once a fetus is considered a child, the loss of its existence is mourned as the death of a life that could be—wanted or not. However nameless and without personality, such a creature obtains the right to die a human being. Regardless of the circumstances, the records will show an individual to have lived and died.

The children continued to dance and play. *Those children are considered human too, aren't they?* Renko thought. *As human as the thing growing inside of me. Even so...*

Human happiness offers no more freedom to travel than the span of a hospital lobby. I may not have enough in me to reach even that piano over there, Renko thought as she watched the children play, *but what little difference does **that** make?*

Renko smirked and popped the end of her vaporizer in her mouth.

Related Image

“What’s that?”

“Yeah, I know her.”

“No, I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“The last time I saw her? It was probably at the group welcome party.”

“Yeah.”

“When was the welcome party?”

“It had to have been around April. I mean that’s when classes start, right? The latest it could have been was May. It wouldn’t make sense to hold a welcome party later than that.”

“Yeah, I have to admit it’s kind of strange.”

“Hmm?”

“Well, I mean, I’m not really in to that kind of thing, so I can’t say...”

“Interesting...”

“But she’s cutting it pretty close, don’t you think?”

“Huh?”

“You’re right. It has been at least six months, hasn’t it?”

Composite Image

Renko stood at the entrance to Merry's apartment building.

How long now had she watched her friend Merry's existence become smeared across reality?

Renko looked up at the blue sky, with its white moon and sporadic stars. *9:42:17 AM*, the current time flashed in the back of her mind. If Renko did not visit, Merry would not eat, but only stare into space as her body wasted away. Renko was careful not to shake the white paper box she held by her side as she punched in Merry's room number at the console in front of the automatic glass doors of the building. A call-tone rang several times, but no one answered. Renko input the room number again, and again no one answered. During the fourth attempt, the ringing was cut short, and the door unlocked. Renko walked through the automatic doors, straight to the elevator lobby. Merry lived on the fifth floor—one of the higher floors of the building. Renko pressed the UP button in the lobby and a set of doors opened for her, sooner than expected. Renko climbed into the elevator and pressed the button for the fifth floor. The doors closed, and the sound of strained cables faintly reached her ears.

"So we meet again, Miss."

The elevator was not exactly spacious, and Renko assumed she was alone when she entered, but contrary to her expectations, a girl now seemed to accompany her. Renko looked over the girl's blonde hair tied up with red cords, her

white shirt and black skirt with alternating layers of black and red, and followed the trail of smoke creeping about the compartment back to the long brown pipe held between the girl's fingers.

"Say, Miss—Why don't I tell you today about a certain kind of wasp?" said the girl with a chuckle, smiling in shades of night.

"The wasp in question plants its eggs in a caterpillar. As the eggs hatch, the little wasp children grow, feasting on the nutrients the caterpillar ingests. Now what do you think they do next?"

The elevator climbed from the second to the third floor as it continued upwards.

"They take up residence in the caterpillar's brain, paralyzing its sense of pain and rendering it unable to feel full. No matter how much the caterpillar eats its hunger persists. It might as well be drinking seawater to quench its thirst. So the caterpillar keeps eating and eating, only to feed the wasp children inside of it. Even as the children consume its internal organs as they grow, the caterpillar keeps eating, for it cannot feel pain, only an unending hunger."

From the third floor, the elevator rose to the fourth.

"Finally, having swollen to three times its normal size, the caterpillar ruptures, and the wasp children—now adults—fly away, having finished their meal, destined to lay their eggs in yet another host."

A light indicated the elevator had arrived at the fifth floor.

“Well, that’s enough for today. I’ll see you later, Miss.”

Renko exited the elevator, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and walked down the hall toward Merry’s room at the regular pace of one following the path of a predetermined circuit.

Room 503.

Renko put her hand on the doorknob and turned. It was unlocked. As much as Renko wanted to object to Merry’s carelessness, she took advantage of the situation to enter.

Renko had visited Merry’s apartment several times before. The layout was similar to her own. A hallway extended from the entrance to the main room, with access to the kitchen on the left and separate doors for the bath and toilet to the right. The size of the rooms was the main difference, and the fact that this one included a loft, but otherwise their apartments were basically the same—insofar as they could be with Merry’s building well kept and modern, and Renko’s barely standing.

When Renko opened the door, she saw Merry sitting, balled up on her bed, surrounded by countless long thin green plastic sticks. Each stick contained a white circle, and each white circle, a single red line, and each of those many red lines was pregnant with meaning.

Merry said nothing, but only stared blankly into space.

“Merry?”

Merry did not answer.

“Merry, I brought you a cheese tart today.”

“Merry?”

“I don’t want it.”

“Merry, what’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?! Ha! That’s a good one, Renko.”

Merry’s dessicated face looked as if it were made of plaster.

“I was right.”

“Right about what?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know. I’m pregnant,” Merry cackled. “I’m pregnant! I wonder whose child it is. There were so many, it’s impossible to know. Haha! I mean, what *is* this, really?”

“Merry. . .”

“I asked you something, so answer me. What is this?! Look at my fucking abdomen, Renko. Look at it! Why do you think it has gotten so big? It doesn’t take a genius to see there’s something growing inside of me!”

“Why me?” Merry continued, as Renko remained silent. “What did I do? Did I do something wrong? What should I have done different? Tell me, Renko. Deep within the boundaries of the fantasy land that lies at the bottom of the reality in the depths of the abyss of dreams there was

nothing—nothing at all. Why? Answer me, Renko! What am I going to give birth to? A child, or black of night beyond the horizon of sickness?”

Merry opened her eyes wide, and then appeared to lose focus.

Renko set the box with the cheese tart to the side, and removed a vaporizer cartridge from her pocket. She opened it with a squeak and spilled its brown half-full contents over the tart. The sticky sludge slowly toppled out like a wiggling caterpillar.

“It itches, Renko. It itches. Please, give me more cake. Without your cake I cannot go—I cannot go to the deepest place where the boundaries between dreams and reality overflow. It itches. It itches so much Renko. It itches so, so much. . . ”

Merry began to scratch at her face.

Countless red lines began to appear on her white, doll-like skin, and from those lines rose countless red-black blisters—but still, Merry clawed. Even as pus from the rupturing blisters began to cover her face—still, Merry dragged her nails across it. As the pus hardened and dried the skin beneath swelled with inflamed keloids, Merry continued to tear at her face.

Shreds of Merry’s cracked face began to flake as she scraped, and they fluttered down upon her bedsheets like narcissus petals. Between the cracks Renko could see the dark red muscle fibers of Merry’s face, their lustrous gloss exposed

more with each passing second. The skin of her face gave way first, and then the skin of her neck, and soon only clumps of meat covered her skull, her hair falling out with the rest of her skin, in a mess about the bed.

Merry's disfigured face reminded Renko of the head of a dried fetus, grossly enlarged. Her lips parted like the mouth of an octopus and began to blow air in a soft whistle as her head swayed back and forth.

Wait, Renko thought, if I don't put her face back together, she cannot eat cake.

So Renko began to pick up the flakes of Merry's skin and grabbed a nearby bottle of glue. She carefully applied the glue to the back of each flake of skin and pressed it against the meaty orb Merry's head had become. However, perhaps due to her exposed nerve endings, Merry twitched and convulsed like an electrified frog's leg whenever a new flake of skin was applied, so Renko had to press them on very lightly—but doing so only led to more problems. The skin would not stick to Merry's face and Renko's fingers were covered with glue, so soon the skin became caked on Renko's hands and she could not remove it.

What am I going to do?

The more frustrated Renko became, the more inept she became at her task, and soon she could not see the skin of her own hands.

Suddenly, the tips of Renko's fingers began to itch. Although she tried to scratch the itch, both of her hands were covered

with Merry's skin, which got in the way—but the itch was unbearable, so Renko continued to scratch. She rubbed her hands together, in an attempt to shave off some of the skin on both ends. This only caused larger, wart-like clumps of Merry's skin to form, and soon Renko discovered her hands were stuck together. Apparently, the glue had not completely dried. As Renko tried to pull her hands apart, she noticed something growing in between her hands. It was a mass of tiny humanoid arms.

The countless arms extended out of the gap between her hands like a kind of mold. As the arms grew out their ends into hands and fingertips, each fingertip spouted another tiny arm, its geometry a never-ending fractal.

Renko dropped her arms to the ground, as she could no longer lift them due to the weight of the growth. As the still growing arms reached the floor, they latched on, like a root structure, and fanned out across it. While the system's circumference trended to infinity, the area of its coverage converged—but not content with the floor, the growth began to climb up Renko's own arms.

Renko heard a soft whistle.

Merry was trying to say something, but Renko could not interpret the breathy sound.

The growth continued to climb Renko's arms and soon reached her shoulders, her neck, and then her face, extending across her field of vision.

The growth resembled a particular kind of mold.

Light was taken from her—murdered—but Renko felt no pain. She felt hardly anything at all—only weight—but still, she heard Merry’s attempts to communicate—the cooing of her breathy voice, but nothing else.

The tart, Renko thought. *I have to feed Merry the cheese tart.* But Renko had no hope of accomplishing that task in her current state.

The arms keep multiplying. They keep multiplying.

It was dark. All light had gone, and Renko’s consciousness fell deep into the abyss of sleep.

Inserted Image

Renko awoke to a rotten smell assailing her nostrils. She lifted her body slowly from its resting position, like a polar bear she once saw at a zoo, and stared at the sight before her. She registered the sound of the rope creaking before her mind properly registered the swaying image.

Maribel Hearn's corpse hung from the ceiling by a single rope. Her neck must have broken immediately, for the rope dug deeper into flesh of her neck than it seemed it ought to, and the neck below the bloated face was unnaturally stretched.'

She looks like a match, Renko thought.

Splat.

The floor was littered with strewn pregnancy tests and wet excrement—that was the sound's most obvious culprit—but there was something more: a dark red cord extended from the body to a stillborn fetus, expelled from Merry in death along with her placenta—a nameless bloody child drowned in a sea of filth.

Renko stared at it. Although lifeless, it was moving, tugged along by the umbilical cord as Merry's equally lifeless body swayed from the ceiling.

Renko stood up, went to the kitchen, and retrieved a large knife. She then took the fleshy umbilical cord in her hand and tried to cut it with the knife. However, it was hard for her to hold it just right with one hand, and Merry's

body kept swaying, so the knife would not cut all the way through. She tried again and again until she had cut about half of the way, and then pulled down as hard as she could. She could hear some of the blood vessels rupturing, but the cord itself would not give. She continued to pull, several times, and tried the knife again and again.

Finally, the last of the flesh and blood vessels ripped, and the cord fell around Renko's bloody hand that held it. Renko lifted the cord with the fetus and placenta attached to it and returned to the kitchen.

First, Renko ran the water in the sink and rinsed off the excrement still stuck to the fetus, before lobbing it onto a nearby cutting board so she could finish washing the filth from her own hands. She then took her kitchen knife and beat its blade against the fetus, crushing its structure into tenderized pieces with pre-deterministic mechanical indifference, raising the blade and striking down again and again and again.

Once the fetal remains had lost a degree of their mushy resistance, Renko reached across the counter for the flesh-stained meat grinder, and shoved the crushed fetus inside, before replacing the lid and slowly turning the manual device's hand crank. The sound of the creature's thin, underdeveloped bones' wet splintering as they were processed into finer grains rose unpleasantly over the device's usual din.

Renko dumped the contents onto the cutting board. It wasn't enough. She used her knife to break up some of the tougher chunks and pushed the meat back into the grinder.

Finally, satisfied with the texture, she transferred the ground meat to a bowl, sprinkled on some salt, and began to knead it. As Renko listened to the squelching sounds of the meat, the most distinctive sensation she felt was the ambivalent tendency of the meat's fibers to come together as if they were fused, only to separate at the slightest pressure.

Renko opened the refrigerator and took out an egg. With one hand she deftly cracked the egg opened and separated its contents into the yolk and whites in the half-shells. After adding the yolk, she continued to knead until she was satisfied with the consistency, before molding the meat into two large patties the palms of her hands.

Next, Renko clicked on the stove and set a skillet over the flames. As the pan warmed, she grabbed a stick of butter from the refrigerator and cut a rather large pat, flicking the pan to swirl the butter evenly across the heated surface. Once the butter had melted, Renko grabbed the meat patties and dropped them in.

The smell of sizzling meat wafted from the pan.

As Renko waited for the first halves of the patties to cook, she took out her vaporizer and began to smoke. The smell of meat filled the room. Renko took a spatula and flipped the patties over, before covering them with a glass pot lid. The lid filled with white steam. Renko continued to smoke her vaporizer.

After a while, Renko lifted the lid and poked at the meat with long cooking chopsticks. The patties still bled; they

needed more time. Renko replaced the lid and lowered the heat of the burner.

Wait, Renko thought. *You can't have a nutritionally balanced meal with just meat...* ugh. —but the thought of making anything else was pure anathema to Renko; the additional effort would not yield any payoff.

Renko lifted the lid and poked the meat again. It did not bleed.

Renko lifted the two patties off the skillet, placed them in a bento box she found on the counter, and poured ketchup over them. She looked in the refrigerator for anything she could use for a side-dish, but there was nothing useful—no vegetables at all. She tried the freezer next. There was a frozen plate of cooked rice.

This is will have to do, she thought, and put it in the microwave to defrost before returning to Merry's room.

As Renko gazed at Merry's hanging corpse, she picked up the box with the cheese tart. She took a bite. A bitter taste spread in her mouth.

"Solids really aren't my thing..." she muttered with a grimace, but she forced three bites down her throat anyway.

"Hello again, Miss. Before I let you go, I have one last interesting creature to tell you about: a kind of fly."

Renko looked around, but saw no one.

"This kind of fly lays its eggs inside the body of an ant.

After the eggs hatch, the fly larvae make their way to the ant's head, where they devour the ant's central nervous system, rendering the ant completely devoid of independent thought—but all does not end there. The fly larvae take the place of the ant's nervous system. The ant no longer thinks on its own—it cannot think, but it can be force-fed thoughts, and those thoughts continue to drive the ant, until the fly larvae reach maturity—the same as the others. So this ant works for the fly larvae, whether it is in the colony with its peers or out in the field. What do you think happens at the end of all its hard work?"

As the honeyed voice of the girl crept over her on its way into her ears, Renko thought she felt something wrap its arms around her neck, and smelled a fragrance that was bittersweet.

"The larvae behead it," the voice continued, "and after it falls to the ground, the fully-grown flies split the ant's head open and take flight on their way to infest the next. Miss—let me be frank—that's what you are. That's what your actions speak. Now I'm only here because Yakumo asked me for a favor—I've got nothing against you, personally—so would it kill you to play along? Miss? Miss. What are you carrying? You know the answer. I've told you. First, it destroys your sense of equilibrium. Then, it blinds you, eats the heart that makes you feel pain, and finally, it beheads you."

Renko felt a lukewarm sensation on her neck. It took a few seconds for her to realize she had been licked.

“Say, Miss—I’m sure you’re familiar with the concept of a garbage bin? I’m talking about the kind you have in those portable terminal devices you use all the time. You throw your data into it and then clear it all away, as if it was never there in the first place. But let me ask you. Does it really work that way? Even if you throw the contents out, you still remember throwing it away, don’t you? You do. So how do you throw *that* away?”

A small finger reached out and scooped a bit of the sticky substance Renko had dumped on top of the cheese tart and held it in front of her eyes.

“That’s what this is for, isn’t it? No? Well, if it isn’t...”

The voice chuckled.

“I think you’ll find you’ll lose your head—just like this.”

Renko’s head began to slide. By the time she heard the girl’s last words, her neck was already severed, and her head topped to the floor. Upon impact, half her face shattered like porcelain and was strewn about the floor. With her remaining eye, she looked up to find the blonde-haired girl, in her red and black layered skirt, holding her pipe in one hand, smiling.

“Come on. The rice will be done soon. You had better hurry up and put yourself back together!” The girl cackled in a deep-throated voice.

On the undersides of the fragments of her face, Renko saw countless red and black maggots squirming. Several more

spilled out from the parts of her face that were still together, and they began to eat the pieces she had lost to the floor.

I'm losing pieces of myself... Renko thought.

"It's not over yet, Miss." The girl continued to cackle.

"I won't let the Gymnopédies end just yet."

Composite Image

“Hey, remember me?”

Renko glanced up at the sky as she waited for Merry’s acquaintance to turn around. It was just past noon—*12:12:15 PM*.

“Uh, yeah. . . It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” He did not look happy to see her, but forced a smile anyway. “What’s up?”

“Sorry it’s been so long. I’ve just been so busy with work lately. . . but never mind me. Were you planning to grab lunch at the convenience store like you always do?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Well I’m glad I caught you then,” Renko said with a smile and produced a bento box tied up in a cloth. “I tried making you a bento. Would you like to eat it?”

“Uh, yeah. . . Thank you. Um. . .”

“Why don’t we sit down over there?” said Renko, pointing to one of the campus benches.

Merry’s acquaintance eyed Renko suspiciously. After they sat down, she had not said a word, but only smiled at him. He unwrapped the bento box she gave him. The box itself was plain: silver, but otherwise undecorated. Renko was not exactly known for being fancy, so nothing unexpected there. He opened the lid. Inside were two hamburger patties and some rice—nothing more.

“Sorry, I kind of went overboard on the meat, so I didn’t anything left I could get within my budget.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I don’t mind. I haven’t had the money to eat meat in ages,” Merry’s acquaintance replied before taking a bite out of one of the patties. “This meat... What kind is it? It tastes...different.”

“It’s all natural, so if you are used to synthetics it may taste a little odd.”

“All natural? You got your hands on some all natural meat?!”

“I said I went a little overboard, didn’t I?”

“Wow... I mean, it is different, but it is good.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’m not too confident in my cooking abilities...”

“Don’t be modest. It really is good...” Merry’s acquaintance paused. “...but it is a shame I didn’t get a chance to taste more of a variety of things you can make. You’ll have to treat me some other time.”

“In that case...” said Renko, drawing closer, “... why don’t I make you dinner tonight?”

Composite Image

Renko slipped quietly out of bed. Outside the window, the moon glowed and the stars twinkled. *Light once wiped out by civilization*, she thought, *but revived by the efforts of those who missed it.*

1:12:14 AM.

Renko turned her gaze from the window to the face of the man she had slept with. He was snoring loudly. She stared at him a few moments, but eventually left the bedside to look for her shoulder bag. She did not bother to dress herself. From her bag, she retrieved a few rolls of black electrical tape among other things and returned to the bed.

She took the sleeping man's right hand and slipped a piece of tape between his pointer and middle finger. She then wound the tape back and forth around and between the two fingers so that they were effectively fused to one another. She proceeded to do the same to his ring and pinky fingers. Then, she wound the tape in a similar fashion around and between the two groups, so that all four of the man's fingers were fused together. Next, she bent his thumb into his palm and curled the other four fingers over it. She then wrapped tape around the closed fist, covered it in a plastic bag, and taped the opening of the bag closed around his wrist.

Satisfied, Renko proceeded to do the same with the man's left hand, his right foot and his left foot. Finally, she approached the man's face and laid a strip of tape over his closed lips. She laid another strip over his nostrils. Then,

without missing a beat, she slipped a final plastic bag over his head, and wound it shut around his neck.

Done with her work, but still not bothered to dress herself, Renko sat down in an empty chair beside her bag. She fished out her vaporizer and popped a cartridge in.

I wonder how long that took me, Renko thought, glancing out the window. *1:22:17 AM.*

Suddenly, the man's body twitched. Even where she sat, Renko could see his neck convulsing in a desperate attempt to draw in air. His arms flew to his face and then to the tape around his neck, but because of the state of his hands, all he managed to do was generate a lot of rustling as he rubbed the surface repeatedly, the fingertips he needed locked under several layers of plastic. He could not find the bounding edge.

The man began to thrash about wildly in his state of panic, and fell from the bed to the floor. He continued to rub his neck desperately, but succeeded only in making more noise as he flopped and flailed.

Renko watched the man's ordeal in a dazed silence, enjoying the notes of flavor in her smoke.

"By the way, you were wrong about something," she said finally.

It was not clear whether the man could hear Renko, but even if he could he certainly was not listening.

"I don't smoke tobacco," she said with a chuckle, before

taking a long drag.

“This is marijuana, Bitch.”

Three minutes and forty-four seconds later, the man stopped moving, and urine pooled as he involuntarily wet himself. Renko poked at his face with her foot to make sure he was dead, and brought her shoulder bag to his side.

Renko placed her hands on the body. It was soft and pliable, like a thick confectionery jelly¹¹, so, as if imitating an artisan candy maker undoing her work, Renko bent and folded the arms back into the body, kneading it into the most basic shape: a ball. No longer did it have any boundaries, and the manner in which the limbs were twisted made it hard to tell the shape the mass formally took. Renko put the compacted man into her bag, and finally foraged around for her clothes.

After dressing herself, Renko lifted her bag onto her shoulder and clicked the trigger on her vaporizer for another smoke.

“Well I think I’m done here. I’ll see myself out,” she said to the empty room and left.

With her bag over her shoulder, Renko stood at the entrance to Merry’s apartment building.

¹¹ *Mizu-Ame* or “water candy” is a clear gelatinous substance made of starches converted to simple sugars through various processes that may be soft and pliable (or liquid) at higher temperatures but hard at lower temperatures. It is used to make hand-sculpted hard candy (*Ame-Zaiku*).

Renko looked up at the night sky, with its white moon and twinkling stars. 2:38:25 AM, the current time flashed in the back of her mind. She punched in Merry's room number at the console in front of the automatic glass doors at the front of the building. A call-tone rang several times, but no one answered. Renko input the room number again, and again no one answered. During the fourth attempt, the ringing was cut short, and the door unlocked. Renko walked through the automatic doors, straight to the elevator lobby. Merry lived on the fifth floor—one of the higher floors of the building. Renko pressed the UP button in the lobby and a set of doors opened for her, sooner than expected. Renko climbed into the elevator and pressed the button for the fifth floor. The doors closed, and the sound of strained cables faintly reached her ears.

In the small box that was the elevator, nothing strange happened—nothing wrong. The doors opened on the fifth floor, and Renko walked down the hall toward Merry's room at the regular pace of one following the path of a predetermined circuit.

Room 503.

Renko put her hand on the doorknob and turned. It was unlocked. As much as Renko wanted to object to Merry's carelessness, she took advantage of the situation to enter.

Renko had visited Merry's apartment several times before. The layout was similar to her own. A hallway extended from the entrance to the main room, with access to the kitchen on the left and separate doors for the bath and toilet

to the right. The size of the rooms was the main difference, and the fact that this one included a loft, but otherwise their apartments were basically the same—insofar as they could be with Merry’s building well kept and modern, and Renko’s barely standing.

When Renko opened the door, she saw Merry eating a cheese tart.

“Merry?”

“What is it, Renko?”

“There’s an amusement park I want to visit. Let’s go. Now.”

Slow and Gravely, and Desiccated Embryos¹²

By the time Renko emerged from her daze, the ride was over. The obnoxious sounds, saturated color lights and darkness had all retreated in favor of the glow of white diodes to illuminate the parked coaster-car at the exit platform.

Renko pushed up on the metal safety bar to release it from her shoulders and stood up. Immediately, she felt dizzy and had to catch herself by grabbing the back of the seat with her hand. It felt as if something was creaking deep within her brain, and it was hard to maintain her sense of balance. Still, she managed to step off the ride and onto the platform. When she turned back, there was no one else present. Renko thought there *should* be someone there, but... *It was so dark after all. I must have been seeing things.*

Renko reached for the vaporizer in her pocket. The usual itch was getting out of hand. She had to take her hit.

As she clicked the trigger on her vaporizer, Renko followed the signs toward the exit—in effect, anyway. Renko had no idea or interest in where the exit was, but her bag knew where it wanted to go, and it swayed like a pendulum with Renko in tow.

When Renko left the attraction, a bright full moon was

¹²Lent et Grave, and Embryons Desséchés. The former is the playing instructions for Erik Satie's Gymnopédie No. 3, and the latter is the title of another of Satie's piano compositions.

visible in the sky among the stars. The Ferris wheel and a carousel turned aimlessly as ever.

When did amusement parks, these empty collections of machinery, fall from the hands of children?

There is no such thing as a gap-less human being. There are breaks in the continuity of our time, and of our hearts and minds. Two may hold hands, but the fusion of their being ends at the shoulders—two do not become one. No one can survive without others; everyone exists solely in their own insurmountable isolation. You cannot see another's dreams. You do not see the world they live in. Therein lie the gaps, and the longing that demands we fill them with *something*. But that something inevitably takes the form of a shared minimal threshold, the lowest common denominator of happiness. It may be a fairytale, or an inoffensive musical scale, or an aimlessly spinning carousel. In other words, we seek amusement, and amusement exists for us to cram into our empty spaces. However, fulfillment decays into boredom, and we never stop searching for something to shove into the gaps in our being. It has to be new; it has to have a different color to it—but under its dressings it's all the same in its aim and its substance: something inoffensively pleasant. And as we turn our gazes to the next big thing, the playthings we have discarded rot in silent wreckage, forgotten.

But that giant Ferris wheel, a discarded relic that long should have collapsed into a mound of rubble, defied Renko's expectations. Even as it turned, swaying in the wind under

the full moon, not a creak could be heard.

The bag kept Renko going.

*Where do you want to make me go? Where do **you** want to go?*

Piecing together any thought at all required more effort than Renko was willing to give. However...

Renko paused at the entrance to the Ferris wheel. The wheel had stopped and the door of the nearest gondola opened, welcoming her.

The bag told Renko to go, so she climbed into the ride and set her bag down. Then, she opened it.

Inside the bag, Renko saw herself, folded up into a candied ball, staring back out at her. She stared at herself, and herself stared back at her.

Renko broke her gaze to look back up at the sky, at its full moon and twinkling stars.

38:92:78 AM.

Composite Image

The sound of a creaking cord echoed off the beams of the skeletal remains of a Ferris wheel. Up in the clear blue sky, above the ruins of the amusement park, the faint image of a full moon could be seen.

The cord continued to creak.

“Well that was unfortunate,” said the girl with a chuckle, looking up from under a large, unusually shaped straw hat. The way she was dressed¹³, she would not look out of place a thousand years in the past, but her attitude was unchanged, and she sat slovenly in her seat as she smoked her pipe, her blonde hair dancing in the breeze.

“I wouldn’t have expected that from you. You are having fun, aren’t you?” the young woman seated across from her replied. She was wearing her usual outdated suit, and after speaking, put her cigar back in her mouth. Her amber colored hair also danced in the breeze, as both were seated in a raised gondola with blown out windows.

Between them, the creaking cord was swaying.

A girl was hanging on the end of that cord, and her neck must have broken because it was awfully elongated—in fact, having been exposed to the elements for some time, it appeared ready to rip apart. Fat flies buzzed around the body. Her eyes had partially decomposed, with maggots in

¹³Her dress is described as *tsubo-shōzoku*, a form of traveling attire commonly worn outside the home by women of middle to high birth from the Heian to Kamakura Period (794-1333 AD).

the eye sockets feasting on their remainder and the flesh behind them. Some of them toppled out and fell to the ground.

A dark red cord extended from the body to a mass of dried excrement, caked over a mountain of maggots, under which the dessicated remains of a fetus could, just barely, be seen.

“You rarely find such taste within your boundaries, after all. . . I can’t deny it’s made me *very wet*,” the girl added with a lascivious smile before taking a drag from her pipe.

“Is that any good, by the way?” said the woman, pointing to the pipe.

“It’s good enough to distract me when I don’t want to think.”

“I wouldn’t have expected your type to be bothered by anything.”

“Goddesses are like trash bins for the human heart. If you were dumped on like that all day, you too would enjoy yourself some mindless fooling around.”

“Point taken,” replied the woman with a laugh.

The sound of the creaking cord continued to fill the echo chamber of the Ferris wheel’s remains.

“Speaking of mindless fooling around. . . You have no right to claim you have any brains, Renko,” said the woman, smiling as she held her cigar in her mouth. “What rational person responds to someone stealing their man with the fuck all you did to me?”

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Continued Image

Did you enjoy the circus?

Did you have a good time?

If you did, then that's wonderful.

If you didn't, well that's too bad.

But don't you worry.

There is more out there to see: a Ferris wheel, a carousel, a roller coaster and even a tea-cup ride.

Don't you worry. It will be fun.

I'm sure it will be fun.

Don't worry, because I'll play with you.

As long as it takes, until your heart breaks.

—and so, with a boisterous laugh, the goddess closed the bag.

The Bird of the Ruins

L'oiseau des ruines se dégage de la mort,
Il nidifie dans la pierre grise au soleil,
Il a franchi toute douleur, toute mémoire,
Il ne sait plus ce qu'est demain dans l'éternel.

—Yves Bonnefoy “L'Oiseau des Ruines”

Hier Regnant Desert (1958)

The bird of the ruins emerges from death,
To nest upon the grey stone under the sun;
Having ventured beyond all grief and memory,
No longer does he know “tomorrow” in eternity.¹⁴

—Yves Bonnefoy “The Bird of The Ruins”

Yesterday's Desert Dominion (1958)

¹⁴Disclaimer: My translation of this poem was based primarily on the Japanese translation of it included in the text. However, I also referenced English translations of the poem by Galway Kinnell, Richard Pevear and Anthony Rudolf.

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